

Making the Permanent Collection Matter

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Since the theme of the conference is striking a balance between making exhibitions and caring for the permanent collections, I would like to begin by emphasizing that what follows is not intended as exhibition bashing. I like exhibitions as much as the next person. I like to make them, I like to visit them. Several of the most important experiences I have had in front of works of art happened in special exhibitions. Exhibitions can contribute tremendously to our knowledge of art – I mention here only *Kunst voor de Beeldenstorm* at the Rijksmuseum, *Paris 1400* at the Louvre, or *Prague and the Crown of Bohemia* at the Metropolitan Museum. Each of them distilled the results of years of research and spawned a renewed academic interest in hitherto neglected areas. I found each of them to be personally transformative.

A reasonable exhibition program contributes to the vitality of an institution. As my colleague Klaas Ruitenbeek, Director of the Asian Art Museum in Berlin, points out, making exhibitions is something that makes curators happy: It allows them to introduce the fruit of their expertise to the public and it gives them a stage – exhibitions are thus good for the morale of a museum. Exhibitions are also good for attendance: they draw attention to a museum and, we hope, will attract visitors to the permanent collections.

But this latter point, it turns out, is all too often a fallacy. The attention brought to the museum is comparable to a kindling fire, which burns brightly but fades quickly. After a temporary spike, attendance figures return to their previous numbers. More and more museums are caught in a vicious circle, where most resources are geared toward the exhibition calendar, with the result that, as Blake Gopnik states in the current issue of the *Art Newspaper*, “for today’s visitor, the first question on entering a museum is ‘What do you have on?’ – as though we’ve all forgotten that the most important thing a museum ‘has on’ is the art it owns.” The incessant production of exhibitions leads to the impression in the public’s mind that a museum is not worth visiting, unless a special exhibition is on view. I believe that one of the most serious challenges facing us all is, how do we change this view? How do we make the permanent collection relevant again – and that not only to tourists and international visitors but to our local constituency as well? This is nothing new. As Gopnik also noted, Francis Haskell, warned over twenty years ago that exhibitions “are now replacing museums as the principal vehicles for the transmission of visual culture.”

In the long run, the frantic pace of exhibitions does affect the public’s perception of what a museum is. It often has a negative impact on a museum’s ability to take care of its collection. As we all know, enormous resources –both financial and human-- are poured into exhibitions, often at the expense of the permanent collection. I worked for ten years at the Metropolitan Museum, a wealthy institution, and have been for the last five years at the Berlin Museums, an institution even more art rich but severely strapped for cash. What are the commonalities and differences between the two? In both places, a large exhibition will be the main focus of a curator’s attention for several years, meaning that other pursuits, such as researching

and cataloguing the permanent collection, are put on a back burner. An enormous machine like the Metropolitan Museum has enough resources to fuel an efficient education department and a vast array of public programs, so that the promotion of the permanent collection does not really suffer. In a place like the Berlin Museums, however, where the non-curatorial and non-conservation departments are bare bone, it is often the case that researching and promoting the permanent collection nearly ceases during the preparations for an exhibition. All energy in the museum seems to be directed at putting on and then recovering from the show.

What can we do to redress this situation? One solution would be to reduce the number and the size of exhibitions we put on. Blake Gopnik reports that Nicholas Penny cut down the exhibition program of the National Gallery in London by one third to alleviate what he calls “the permanent state of emergency” that is inherent to a full exhibition schedule, so that the care of the collection can receive more attention. Another important factor would be, in my mind, to reduce the size of our exhibitions. I think we can all agree that most exhibitions would not suffer, and indeed many would be greatly improved, if there were thirty to fifty percent fewer loans on view. We curators are often so convinced of the rightness of our own ideas that we are reluctant to cut down on our list of loans, especially if those loans have already been granted. Exhibitions that go on and on are impossible to digest in one visit and after the fourth or fifth gallery, the visitor’s attention span is already challenged. Reducing the number of loans in our exhibitions is not only visitor-friendly and a good thing for your institution’s finances, but it is also considerate to the lending institutions. I have been to too many exhibitions where I have seen objects from my museum making a tangential point at best, whereas the organizing curator, when he visited me, had assured me that without it the show would fall apart. We have all been there, done that. We have asked for more loans than we thought we would need, only to be surprised by how generous lenders turned out to be. This is when we need to take a red pen to our list of loans and cross out everything that is there merely as garniture. Believe me, I would be grateful to receive an e-mail from a borrower telling me that a loan we agreed to is no longer needed. This would save us a lot of work and spare us the absence of a courier for several days to accompany the loan – to say nothing of the absence of the work from our galleries, or the wear and tear inherent in shipping it.

The blockbuster phenomenon has made it more difficult for smaller, focused exhibitions to be embraced by the public. In 2009 we organized one-gallery show titled “John Flaxman and the Renaissance”; the exhibition, which contained only ten objects, aimed at drawing attention to Flaxman’s engagement with the art of the Quattrocento rather than with classical art. We borrowed Flaxman’s relief of the Adoration of the Magi from a British private collection, two preparatory sketches from the British Museum, and the plaster model from the Sir John Soane Museum – all foreign loans were thus from the UK and could be shipped on a single truck. The Prussian Palaces in Potsdam lent the Pegasus Vase, which allowed us to illustrate Flaxman’s work for Wedgwood. The refurbishment of the Renaissance galleries in the Bode-Museum at that time made it easy to bring up Donatello’s Pazzi Madonna for three months and we brought Masaccio’s Adoration of the Magi from the Pisa

Altarpiece from the Gemäldegalerie. Needless to say, the show was done on a shoestring budget – but we did actually publish a small catalogue. The exhibition received positive reviews both from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and from The Burlington Magazine. We had no money for any publicity other than a banner on the façade. One day, I received an angry letter from a man who complained that he had come all the way from Hamburg to see the exhibition. He was outraged that there were so few works in the show. How dare we advertise the exhibition on the façade of the museum? He accused me of not taking the public seriously. More critically, he thought that he had wasted his time, since he had already visited the Bode-Museum once before, all 65 galleries of it.

From one extreme to another – from an exhibition done on a shoestring budget to one for which all stops were pulled. In 2011, the Bode-Museum hosted an exhibition on Renaissance portraiture, which had been curated jointly by Stefan Weppelmann of the Gemäldegalerie and Keith Christiansen of the Metropolitan Museum. The success of the exhibition is entirely to their credit. I take responsibility for one thing: insisting that the exhibition take place at the Bode-Museum rather than at the exhibition hall at Kulturforum. As you are probably all aware, the Berlin Museums have been pursuing since 1999 the goal of reuniting their painting and sculpture collections in the Bode-Museum and in an expansion across the Kupfergraben canal. It was important for the public, the media, and politicians to see how good Renaissance art looks in the Bode-Museum, especially since the exhibition combined painting and sculpture along with drawings and medals. Stefan Weppelmann was extremely successful in securing financial backing for the show and an unprecedented amount was available for advertisement. You see here a banner of Cecilia Gallerani – Leonardo's Lady with an Ermine from Cracow hanging in one of Berlin's train stations. There was advertisement on buses in Berlin and on posters everywhere in Germany. A very good publicist was hired to create hype about the exhibition, which became THE event of the year. However, be careful what you wish for. Because of fire and safety regulations, we could not have more than 300 visitors in the exhibition at any given time, which caused huge lines. One art critic wrote that one went to see Renaissance faces but saw mostly the long faces of the people waiting in line. People queued for up to seven hours to see the exhibition. The Leonardo was clearly the star of the show, which it left three weeks before the end, as it was to feature in the Leonardo exhibition at the National Gallery in London. Even after the Lady with the Ermine left, visitors still had to wait several hours to get into the show.

The irony of this situation is that nearly 40% of the works in the exhibition were from the Berlin collections, mainly the Gemäldegalerie and the Skulpturensammlung. These very same works, when they are shown in the context of the permanent collection, attract relatively few visitors. Both institutions, each with over 50 exhibition galleries, have about 200.000 visitors a year. By comparison, The Cloisters in New York, with 12 galleries and a location far from other attractions in Manhattan, has nearly 250.000 visitors a year. Similarly, as Blake Gopnik points out, when the Prado mounted a Velazquez exhibition in 1990, visitors waited in line for the better part of a day, when in fact 60% of the pictures on view normally hang in the Prado.

A recent visitors' survey at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin provided us with some startling information. Over 30% of the visitors identify as "Fachwissenschaftler", that is to say, mostly as art historians. If you think of the proportion of art historians in the general population, it would seem that we are doing a terrible job in our outreach programs. At exhibition openings at the Gemäldegalerie, my observation that most people in attendance are in their 60s and 70s. I don't believe that visitor figures are the sole indicator of the quality of museum programs; however, I am concerned that unless we establish lasting connections with younger generations, society and politicians will grow ever more reluctant to support costly institutions that are perceived to benefit only a small segment of the public.

The question is thus, how do we establish such connections? I must confess that I have no certainties to offer, merely observations and suggestions based on my own experience in New York and Berlin. We cannot assume that our visitors have a degree in art history and we must absolutely provide them with information. It was decided in Berlin with the opening of the Gemäldegalerie in 1997 to abandon all form of didactic materials other than the audioguide, since visitors are meant to contemplate works of art, not to read texts. This was a significant break from the museum's offerings in Dahlem, where information sheets were available for 10 Pfennig, providing exhaustive discussions of a myriad of art works. Our recent survey revealed that over 80 % of visitors come not alone but with someone, often in a group. In my opinion, an audioguide, although useful, is not conducive to sharing your thoughts about a work of art with your companions. Many visitors do not take the audioguide and are frustrated by the absence of texts. The situation is only marginally better at the Bode-Museum. We translated the museum's guidebook into English and attached a German and an English copy to every bench in the galleries, plus we are producing information sheets; this view is of visitors in the Riemenschneider gallery of the Bode-Museum. The sheets they hold tell who Riemenschneider was, what monochromy in sculpture means, and what a carved retable looks like. There are far too few of these around, but we are producing more. It doesn't matter in what form the written information about the object is made available –if on a wall label, an object label, an information sheet, or an electronic device. The information must be there. In this regard, it is appropriate to congratulate the Kunsthistorisches Museum, where detailed object labels, both in German and English, have recently been made available for pretty much all the paintings in the Gemäldegalerie. I would also argue that it is our responsibility as curators to write these labels, not that of our education departments. We know the objects in our care best and visitors deserve to hear from us why we think that they are important. Of course, it is essential for labels to be edited by educators, who will free the texts of jargon and often point out inconsistencies, but the meat and bones of labels must come from us.

I do not believe that it is possible or desirable to dictate the experience of visitors in a museum. What we must provide, however, are the conditions necessary for meaningful and inspiring experiences to occur. People go to museums for the most varied reasons – and unless one of these reasons is vandalizing the art, I think that all of them are valid. Ernst Gombrich wrote, I believe it was in *The Story of Art*,

that if some people like Impressionist painting because it reminds them of a family outing, a happy occasion when they were outdoors, that is perfectly fine. Others go to a museum because they are curious and want to learn something about the past or other cultures. There are even more profound, transformative, reasons to go to a museum.

Phil Knowlen, who retired last year from the Getty Leadership Institute, tells the story that during a summer internship at the US Congress in Washington, over 50 years ago, he once saw a famous senator at the National Gallery. Phil, who was young and daring, walked up to him and asked, "Senator, why do you come to the National Gallery?" The elderly gentleman, who was alone, replied, "I am visiting with my wife." She had died several years before. The senator came to the National Gallery every Sunday to see her favorite paintings. For him, visiting the museum had a deeply emotive dimension and it helped him cope with his grief. I do not believe that it would ever be possible to engineer an experience such as this one, without it going terribly wrong. But this experience is actually what we should want to happen in our museums. We want the art to touch our visitors at the core and to transport them. Object labels play a role in this process: they provide basic information about works of art, which in turn facilitates an emotional connection. To take a very simplified example, I would argue that it increases our ability to be moved by the Bohemian Pietà from Seon of around 1400 at the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich if we know that Mary is the mother of Jesus and that the red spots on her veil were caused by blood dripping from his wounds as he hung on the cross. It would also help to be told that at the time the work was created, Mary was revered for accepting her son's death and that the faithful were encouraged to empathize with Mary and to try to replicate her feelings.

The more information you make available about your collection, the more it will stay relevant. Ten years ago, the Metropolitan Museum started the Timeline of Art History, covering human creativity from prehistory to the present, all of it based on works in the permanent collection. The timeline is organized chronologically and geographically. It has been added onto continuously and now contains hundreds of pages on subjects such as ancient Greece, icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium, astronomy and astrology in the medieval Islamic world, and Cubism. An art teacher from the Bronx told me that she used the timeline as a teaching tool as she had no money to buy books. She instructed her class to select works from the Met's timeline and to do research on them, again, using the timeline. (Rembrandt-Velazquez) She then took them to the Met, where students had to tell the class why the individual works mattered to them. Several of the students had never been to Manhattan, most had never visited a museum, many came from families where there were firearms or a parent in jail. These teenagers, who would have been typecast by most educators as beyond reach, came to the Met, looking for "their" Velazquez or "their" Rembrandt. What happened there was an emotional appropriation of a work of art. This is, really, what we hope to achieve: teenagers who had never been to a museum before saying that old master paintings matter to them.

Recently, two museums have done remarkable work to make their permanent collections relevant on an emotional level. One of them is, once again, the

Metropolitan, which, over the last three years has launched two online programs – both are the brainchild of Teresa Lai, who also oversaw the Timeline of Art History. In the first program, titled “Connections”, museum employees –not just curators-- speak about subjects of interest to them and how these are reflected in the collection. One of the most moving of these discussions is the one by Bruce Schwarz, a photographer, on how light affects our perception of works of art. The second, more recent, program is called 82nd and Fifth. The museum’s website tells us: “82nd & Fifth is the Met's address in New York City. It is also the intersection of art and ideas. We've invited 100 curators from across the Museum to talk about 100 works of art that changed the way they see the world. Eleven Museum photographers interpret their vision: one work, one curator, two minutes at a time.” The key point here is that art is transformative, it can change the way we see the world. It is our responsibility to enable our public to be transported by the art in our care.

The most significant and influential program of recent years in promoting the permanent collection has got to be Neil MacGregor’s History of the World in 100 Objects, done in partnership with the BBC. In it, Neil was able to turn the British Museum’s collection into a collective mirror for all of us. The key to the success of the program, in which each episode lasts about 15 minutes and focuses solely on one object, is that it addresses universal themes, such as desire, fear, and hope, through which the objects from the past become relevant to us in the present. Discussing a prehistoric stone shaped into a knife, Neil talks about the hierarchy of needs and how having tools has allowed us to focus on things other than survival. The object in the vitrine is no longer just a curiosity from the past, in this case the very distant past, but something that helps us discover who we are and where we come from.

As another example of a museum making its permanent collection relevant to a new audience, I would like to present a project that was done at the Bode-Museum in the school year 2011-2012. Titled: Powerlessness, Fear, Ecstasy – or The Museum of Emotions, the project is the brainchild of an independent educator, Anja Edelmann. She obtained a grant from the city of Berlin as part of an initiative to expose school children to culture. Compared to the Metropolitan Museum, our resources for education in Berlin are minimal. At The Cloisters, with 12 exhibition galleries, we had five full-time educators. At the Bode-Museum, with 65 exhibition galleries, I share one educator’s position with the Alte Nationalgalerie. This is why I am very keen to develop such partnerships in order to secure more resources for further programs.

We have good programs in place for younger children. It is much more difficult to reach teenagers and there has been a tendency in Berlin to give up on kids after the age of 12. I am told that teenagers find ancient art “uncool” – that may be, but it remains our responsibility to change that. The film that you are about to see shows that teenagers can indeed be reached and that a collection of ancient art, such as that at the Bode-Museum, can be made relevant to them.

Anja Edelmann chose emotions as a way to build a bridge to works of art. Students at school identified emotions and discussed what meaning those had for them. Each student then “adopted” an emotion as his or her own for the duration of the project. The students came to the museum on several occasions. I toured them

through the collections, telling which works were important to me and why. Then, as an assignment, they went through the museum looking for works of art embodying the same emotions they had adopted.

The works of art in the Bode-Museum have for the most part a Christian iconography. Most of the students we worked with have little affinity with Christianity. One group came from a housing project in an outlying neighborhood in the former East Berlin and most children had clearly had no religious education; the other group consisted almost entirely of Muslims. One challenge I set myself was, how do I make Donatello relevant to Turkish teenagers?

In the course of several visits and a final event in which the students showed their families their own museum of emotions, two transformations occurred: first, the students realized that emotions that matter to them existed in centuries past - the collections of the Bode Museum, which cover more than 15 centuries, were suddenly relevant - perhaps even "cool" – and the students recognized themselves in works of art. Second, they learned to look at and to communicate about art. A student took us to a fourteenth-century group of the apostle John leaning on Christ's breast and said, "My feeling is compassion." It was immediately clear to all of us that this work does express compassion, but what was more difficult and more important, was to say HOW the sculpture does it. The student then talked about gestures, facial expressions, body language, composition. During the project, the students developed a language to convey what they see in and what they feel in front of works of art. The older students took photographs of works in the museum; the faces of the sculptures were enlarged and became masks, worn by the students in a performance for their parents – the students became the works of art.

What have we learned from this project? There must be close cooperation between schools and museums, as the work must take place at both venues. The important thing is that school groups are guided through the museum not only once, but that they repeatedly come to the museum. The first visit is very impressive, most of the students are shy and for many this is an entry into a foreign world. Gradually, however, they feel comfortable enough there to talk about art and their reactions to it.

The film you will see is the work of Marc-Andreas Bochert. It was done to document the process, in order to approach funding institutions to develop further programs for young people. The beauty of Anja Edelmann's approach is how easy it is to replicate. Emotions can be bridges to any collection of figurative art – and probably most collections of abstract art as well, and that regardless of prior knowledge of the students or the teachers. The Bode Museum is not the only museum struggling to reach young people - Museums in Cologne, Leipzig and Munich have the same problem, as well as museums abroad. The film in its original version or the version with English subtitles will hopefully give colleagues in other cities ideas to interest young people in the art in their collections.

Making the permanent collection matter – not only to tourists but also to the local population, is, in my opinion, a matter of life and death for museums. In various parts of Europe, public resources allocated to museums are increasingly measured in terms of how many people come through the door. If we want those institutions we

cherish to survive beyond our own retirement, we, curators, must take action. We are the best advocates for the art in our care.